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ABSTRACT

This report discusses what should be taught in history and social sciences courses, and how the material should be taught. Differing views of educational leaders as well as results of recent research and studies are summarized. The following propositions are offered as stimulators of inquiry and as tentative guides to practice: (1) the greatest increase in knowledge will most likely come from strong and extensive emphasis on core content, based on conceptual frameworks of academic disciplines in history and the social sciences; (2) effective learning of critical thinking involves practice of skills in terms of a cognitive strategy and in concert with core content; (3) core civic values should be taught in connection with knowledge and critical thinking processes; (4) essential elements of the curriculum should be structured logically and related within and between subjects and from one level to the next, with gradual increases in complexity and standards of achievement; (5) direct instruction can be used to develop students' knowledge; (6) indirect teaching procedures such as discussion of issues in an open and supportive classroom environment are also important; (7) direct and indirect teaching methods can be effectively combined; and (8) core curriculum requirements should be developed. References are included. (PS)

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Core Content, Critical Thinking, and Civic Values: Issues on Education in the Social Studies

By
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CORE CONTENT, CRITICAL THINKING, AND CIVIC VALUES: ISSUES ON EDUCATION IN THE SOCIAL STUDIES

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Educational reform has become a major concern of Americans. Numerous national commissions and reports have alerted the public to deficiencies in school programs and needs for improvement in curricula and teaching. Attention has been directed primarily to education in the sciences, mathematics, and English; but the social studies have not been ignored. (In this chapter, social studies is used as a departmental label that refers to subjects in history and the social sciences, which are staples of the secondary school curriculum and sources of content in elementary school courses.)

Public scrutiny and criticism have prompted educators in the social studies (history and the social sciences) to re-examine established curriculum patterns and teaching procedures. Discourse and debate about standards of achievement, quality and uses of textbooks, competence of teachers, and scope and sequence of the curriculum have been highlighted in conferences, journals, newspapers, and television or radio programs. Both USA Today and Theory and Research in Social Education have included articles on trends and issues in the teaching of history and the social sciences in elementary and secondary schools; both CBS and PBS have aired programs on the reform of curricula and teaching, including current arguments about the content of courses in the social studies and the ways these subjects should be taught in the nation's schools.

Old questions and issues on education have aroused new interest among scholars and the general public. What knowledge, cognitive skills, and values should all (or most) students be expected to learn through education in the social studies? How should knowledge, cognitive skills, and values be taught to students of the social studies? How should the social studies contribute to education for citizenship in a free society? This chapter treats these important issues on education in the social studies in terms of three topics: (a) core content, (b) critical thinking, and (c) civic values.

Core Content

The current educational reform movement has stimulated interest in common learning experiences and basic requirements for all students. Reformers of the 1980s have argued for core content, essential subjects that all students should learn. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983, pp. 24-27) recommended that all students seeking to graduate from high school be required to complete a curriculum comprised of five "New Basics"--including "three years of social studies"--to acquire knowledge and cognitive skills "required for success in the 'information' age we are entering." In a

widely-praised report on secondary education in America, Ernest Boyer said: "A core of common learning is essential. The basic curriculum should be a study of those consequential ideas, experiences, and traditions common to all of us by virtue of our membership in the human family at a particular moment in history" (1983, p. 302).

What core content should all students be expected to learn through education in the social studies? Why should they be expected to learn it? How should it be organized and presented to students?

Boyer and other current curriculum reformers (McNett, 1984) recommend at least three years of study in history and the social sciences as a condition for graduation from high school. All urge substantial courses in American history and government or civics. Most also recommend content on western civilization and nonwestern civilizations either as separate courses or as parts of a course in world history. Many supporters of a high school core curriculum in the social studies urge inclusion of geography and economics either as one-semester courses or as units or major themes within courses in history and government. Nearly all core content advocates agree that knowledge in history, geography, civics, and economics should be essential elements of the elementary and middle school curriculum.

State governments and local school districts across the country have responded to the educational reformers by raising requirements for graduation from high school. More than 40 states have new standards for the social studies in secondary schools. These standards include more required courses and periodic testing of knowledge and related cognitive skills in history, geography, government, and economics (U. S. Department of Education, 1984). Several state education departments have established commissions or task forces to redesign curriculum guides in line with ideas of prominent national commissions and reports about the importance of extensive core content requirements.

Some proponents of core content emphasize broad coverage of information in separate subjects. They want students to survey facts presumably known by an educated person. By contrast, other advocates of core content emphasize conceptual frameworks, and facts subsumed by them, which constitute structures of knowledge in academic disciplines. A concept (the building block in a structure of knowledge) is a category, that includes data or facts that fit a definition of it. We use the definition of a concept as a criterion to organize phenomena with certain common characteristics. Concepts are powerful means to learning, remembering, and thinking about facts. However, intellectual power generated by one concept is increased greatly by connecting it to a framework--a set of interrelated concepts.

The core content of academic disciplines, such as geography or economics, consists of interrelated concepts and the facts that pertain to them. We use these concepts and facts to describe and explain aspects of reality. Academic disciplines are distinguished from other subjects in the curriculum by their conceptual frameworks, which demand sustained, systematic (disciplined) intellectual effort by students who would use them effectively to

organize and interpret masses of information. Students of history, for example, learn schemes for periodization--broad categories that subsume sets of lower-level concepts and give order and meaning to facts in a narrative. Educators who emphasize mastery of interrelated concepts in academic disciplines disagree strongly with those who claim that core content consists of relatively formless bodies of facts to be transmitted to students in surveys of separate subjects.

The best new curriculum guides emanating from state education departments, public school districts, and private schools and associations tend to emphasize the basic academic disciplines of history, geography, government (political science), and economics. These curriculum proposals also stress connections of knowledge within and between courses. Interrelated and mutually reinforcing concepts and facts in these basic academic disciplines presumably are generative: they engender subsequent learning.

Proponents of extensive core content requirements claim that general acceptance of their position in schools would:

- Provide all students with equal access to knowledge needed for socioeconomic advancement, democratic participation in public affairs, and personal fulfillment.

- Bring coherence and integrity to curricula that were disordered and overextended during the 1970s through proliferation of new courses and excessive addition of trendy topics to old courses.

- Contribute to social cohesion and national unity among a diverse population of students by providing knowledge of a common American heritage and identity.

- Help students to deal with "information overload" in our "high-tech" society by promoting mastery of conceptual frameworks that subsume or integrate vast amounts of data.

- Lead to large average increases in scores on national and local tests of achievement in history, geography, and civics by distributing widely and equitably basic knowledge about our world in the past and present (McNett, 1984; Sewell, 1984).

Opponents of core content that is anchored in academic disciplines argue that it would have negative effects on students with little interest in or aptitude for intellectual endeavors or preparation for college. They reject the assumption that all students have the need for and ability to profit from extensive and rigorous education in history and the social sciences. They contend that requiring all students to complete an extensive core curriculum, based on academic disciplines, would:

- Restrict opportunities to choose courses that fit particular interests and needs (ASCD Task Force, 1985).

- Create a curriculum imbalance in favor of academic courses at the expense of utilitarian or practical programs with direct social relevance (ASCD Task Force, 1985).

- Frustrate individuals with little or no interest in academic pursuits and cause them to leave school before graduation.

- Deny "authentic intellectual needs of students who differ" by restricting opportunities for social inquiry and stifling interest in the social studies: "If students are to become meaningfully engaged in social inquiry, the curriculum must respond to some extent to unique and unanticipated interests of individual students" (Newmann, 1985, p. 11).

- Limit student perspectives by requiring mastery of certain content in the social studies curriculum without justifiable criteria for selecting it as more worthy than alternative bodies of knowledge (Newmann, 1985).

Clashing opinions on the core content issue are rooted deeply in the 20th century history of curriculum development in the social studies (Hertzberg, 1981). Opponents of extensive core content requirements have represented various positions on the overarching purposes of education--social relevance and utilitiarianism, social criticism and reconstruction, and child-centered teaching and learning (Stanley, 1985). A shared viewpoint of these disparate positions has been antipathy to "subject-centered" curricula and standard requirements for promotion and graduation. Core content opponents have tended to favor interdisciplinary courses of study organized around public issues, social problems, or trendy topics; and they have believed cognitive processes to be more significant educationally than content. Furthermore, they have tended to reject claims that certain subjects are essential in the education of all students (Hertzberg, 1981).

Many educators in history and the social sciences, who have agreed in principle with core content based on academic disciplines, have differed on selection and sequencing of subject matter and means and ends of teaching. Proponents of academic core content have included ahistorical promoters of social science subjects, history enthusiasts with little use for social sciences, academic elitists with slight interest in pedagogy or the needs of average or below-average students, and supporters of general or liberal education for all classes of students, regardless of variations in intellectual ability and background (Keller, 1984; Hertzberg, 1981).

There can be no facile resolution of clashing positions about core content in the social studies. The recent report of the National Council for the Social Studies Task Force on Scope and Sequence (1984) is an instructive example about the complexities and difficulties of reaching agreement on selection and organization of content. After lengthy and careful deliberation, the NCSS Task Force proposed essential goals for education in the social studies and alternative plans for selecting and organizing content.

However, the Task Force report did not settle any critical issues; it served mainly to provoke additional debate among the NCSS membership and to prompt calls for establishment of a new study group or commission to deliberate upon curriculum reform. Given the NCSS Task Force case, the following propositions on core content are offered as stimulators of discourse and investigation, not as conclusive statements.

1. Secondary school courses based on conceptual frameworks (core content) of academic disciplines--history, geography, political science, economics--are keys to acquisition, retention, and effective use of knowledge (Hertzberg, 1981).

2. Strong and extensive emphasis on core content, based on academic disciplines in history and social sciences, is likely to produce significant gains in knowledge among most secondary school students, which they need for academic achievement, socioeconomic advancement, and effective citizenship (McNett, 1984).

3. Interdisciplinary courses on public issues, social problems, or timely topics are not so likely to yield substantial gains in students' knowledge of the past and present. Research on the history of curriculum reform in the social studies shows that this means of selecting and organizing content has tended to produce "a formless curriculum from which students learned little and which bored them" (Hertzberg, 1981, pp. 80-81). Teachers who would integrate knowledge from several disparate subjects and apply it to lessons on issues or topics face complex and unresolved conceptual problems.

4. Acquisition and retention of core content in the social studies by all, or most, students are likely to be facilitated greatly if this content is structured logically within and between subjects from one level to the next, with gradual increases in complexity and standards of achievement that are consistent with the cognitive development and prior learning experiences of students (McNett, 1984; Keller, 1984).

Critical Thinking

Unlike core content, critical thinking, in principle, is not an object of contention among leaders in social studies education. It is endorsed, in the abstract, by advocates of clashing positions on teaching and learning; subject-centered and child-centered educators support critical thinking, as do proponents of education for social reconstruction, civic responsibility, academic integrity, and so forth. They tend to agree that critical thinking is not treated extensively or satisfactorily in most social studies classrooms (Goodlad, 1984; SPAN Project, 1982). However, social studies educators disagree about definitions of critical thinking and purposes and procedures in teaching it to students. What is critical thinking in the social studies? Why should all students learn how to do it? How should it be taught and learned in the social studies?

Definitions of critical thinking vary in breadth or inclusiveness. "Construed broadly, critical thinking comprises the mental processes, strategies, and representations people use to solve problems, make decisions, and learn new concepts" (Sternberg, 1982, p. 46). Some definitions are so inclusive as to equate critical thinking with thinking in general or with all facets of higher level cognition, from application and analysis to synthesis and evaluation. By contrast, narrow definitions specify evaluation as the core of critical thinking. In this view, critical thinking involves formulation and use of criteria to make warranted judgments. For example, critical thinkers in the social studies appraise claims about knowledge, decisions about public policies, and alternative positions about social or political issues. Critical thinkers also evaluate the criteria or standards by which they make judgments.

Critical thinking, whether conceived broadly or narrowly, implies curiosity and skepticism. Cornbleth says (1985, p. 13) that it is "a dynamic process of questioning and reasoning, of raising and pursuing questions about our own and others' claims and conclusions, definitions and evidence, beliefs and actions." However, critical thinking is not synonymous with negativism or iconoclasm. It can lead to affirmation of traditions or conventional wisdom in some instances and to rejection of them in other cases. Neither a conservative nor a liberal bias is built into the processes of critical thinking; rather, these processes (properly employed) can free students from the fetters of ignorance, confusion, and unjustified claims about ideals and reality. Thus, critical thinking in the social studies is compatible with the highest standards of scholarship and citizenship in a democracy.

Educators in the social studies disagree about how to include critical thinking in the curriculum. One position holds that the process of critical thinking is far more important than any body of content to which it might be applied. This view assumes that the same cognitive strategies and skills can be transferred easily to any subject matter. It posits cognitive strategies and skills as the constant and essential elements of a curriculum; by contrast, content would be organized flexibly around social problems, public issues, and current topics, which might vary among students and from semester to semester in the same course. Some advocates of the primacy of cognitive process would go so far as to propose separate courses in critical thinking; the subject matter would vary with student interests. This position clashes sharply with proposals for organization of core content in terms of conceptual frameworks in the academic disciplines of history and the social sciences.

How might a primary emphasis on the process of critical thinking improve education in the social studies? Proponents claim that it would foster development of generalizable strategies and skills that might be transferred pervasively to subjects within and outside of school. These strategies and skills are keys to independent thinking and learning. Furthermore, students would be equipped with enduring intellectual abilities, which could be used long after particular facts had been forgotten. Finally, primary emphasis on cognitive process, instead of content, would provide ample scope for practicing strategies and

skills in critical thinking; this scope would be unduly limited if confined to separate subjects in history and the social sciences (Cornbleth, 1985).

There is strong opposition to proposals for an overriding emphasis on cognitive process vis-a-vis subject matter. Opponents claim that strategies and skills of critical thinking and essential elements of particular subject matter are equally important and should be treated in concert. Educators favoring synergistic connections of certain content and critical thinking assume that development of cognitive strategies and skills is very dependent upon particular structures of knowledge. They argue that critical thinking cannot proceed satisfactorily unless the thinker knows certain concepts and facts related fundamentally to the question under consideration. They also contend that criteria and procedures for inquiry, including critical thinking, vary significantly across different domains of knowledge; for example, there are important differences in criteria and evidence used to justify propositions in history as compared to economics, law, or physics. Therefore, critical thinking should be introduced and developed within the conceptual structures of separate academic disciplines--history, geography, political science, or economics (Cornbleth, 1985).

This position, of course, is compatible with advocacy of core content or essential knowledge anchored in academic disciplines. Issues, problems, and ideas, that might be objects of critical thinking, would be treated within the contexts of particular academic disciplines. Both essential knowledge in distinct academic disciplines of history and the social sciences and interrelated strategies and skills in critical thinking would be in the "core of common learning" of students in schools. Important outcomes of learning, endorsed by proponents of "content-free" and "generic" approaches to education for critical thinking, are also cited by advocates of synergism between critical thinking and particular domains of content. Furthermore, they claim that their position is more likely to yield these desired outcomes of education, such as capability to think and learn independently, propensity and ability to transfer or apply knowledge and cognitive processes to questions and concerns outside of the classroom, and facility in remembering and using major ideas long after details have been forgotten.

Recent research on education for critical thinking provides support for interrelated teaching and learning of critical thinking and core content in history and the social sciences. However, these findings are not conclusive; nobody knows beyond reasonable doubt that there is only one effective approach to education on critical thinking. Several research findings and proposals for practice derived from them, reviewed by Cornbleth (1985) and Sternberg (1986), are summarized below. They are presented as stimulators of discourse and inquiry, not as definitive statements.

1. Development of strategies and skills in critical thinking is enhanced by connecting education on cognitive processes to core content in particular academic disciplines in history and the social sciences. Subject-specific teaching of critical thinking may be the most effective means to build students' abilities to transfer strategies and skills to similar subjects within and outside of school.

2. Generic (content-independent) cognitive strategies and skills may be relatively weak means to development of critical thinking abilities. The goal of one generalizable model of critical thinking remains elusive and chimerical. "One implication of this is that rather than search for one 'best' mode of instruction, it would be preferable to identify the features of successful instruction in various contexts" (Cornbleth, 1985, p. 24).

3. It appears that effective teaching for critical thinking is not characterized by practice of discrete skills; rather, it involves practice of skills with recognition and understanding of how they fit together as part of a strategy and of how the strategy is interrelated with particular subject matter.

4. Teacher modeling of critical thinking and expressions of support for it in the classroom are effective means of developing students' propensities and abilities for critical thinking.

5. Strategies and skills in critical thinking can be developed through computer-based instruction in problem solving and decision making. However, these programs should fit systematically within specific subjects of the standard curriculum in order to reinforce and extend learning achieved through ongoing classroom activities in critical thinking.

6. Students' capabilities to acquire and apply strategies and skills in critical thinking are likely to be increased significantly if they practice them systematically and extensively in all subjects that comprise the social studies curriculum, and in a manner that is consistent with their cognitive development and prior learning experiences.

7. All students have some capacity for critical thinking and should be provided with ample opportunity to develop their capabilities to the fullest. Education in critical thinking "should not be the privilege of a selected intellectual minority or the luxury of the upper class" (Sternberg, 1986, p. 64). Rather, all students should have an equal chance to learn how to think critically about issues and ideas in core content of the social studies.

Civic Values

Critical thinking about issues and ideas involves values, the standards or criteria by which one weighs alternatives and makes choices. Civic values are standards used by citizens to make judgments about public issues or the policies of government officials. Schools in all countries, including the United States of America, are expected to teach civic values through education in the social studies. Recent public opinion polls and survey research studies reveal that a large majority of American adults expect morals and civic values to be taught in schools (Leming, 1985). There are disagreements, however, about what values to teach and how to teach them.

Are there civic values that all students should learn through education in the social studies? If so, what are these core civic values? How should civic values be presented in the social studies classroom?

Core values in the American heritage--freedom, majority rule, equality of opportunity, minority rights, rule of law, limited government, and so forth--are embedded in our most revered documents, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Federalist Papers, Jefferson's First Inaugural Address, and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. These core civic values are emphasized in curriculum guides, textbooks, and proposals for educational reform, and most Americans seem to agree that they are essential elements of education for good citizenship in a free society.

Research reveals that an overwhelming majority of adolescents and adults readily affirm core civic values, but they often seem unwilling to apply some of these values to certain instances involving unpopular individuals or minority groups. For example, many Americans who strongly support freedom of speech, in general, tend to oppose free speech for atheists on public television broadcasts or school assembly programs. Furthermore, research indicates that many secondary school students have very superficial and incoherent notions about the meaning of freedom, equality, justice, authority, responsibility, and other core civic values in the American heritage (Leming, 1985). How can educators in schools and other institutions of our society improve teaching and learning of core civic values?

Some educators advocate direct and unquestioned transmission of civic traditions and values. Indoctrination, flagrant or subtle, is the preferred method of teaching certain answers to all quesitons of right and wrong, good or bad. Complex, perennial issues are reduced to simple dichotomies, in which the "correct" response is indicated clearly, emphatically, and absolutely. In this view, there is no place for deliberation and critical thinking about options; instead answers are justified by references to an all-encompassing doctrine or ideology that is supposed to determine all "right" thoughts and actions. According to Leming (1985, p. 155), "There appears to be a renewed interest in an approach to moral education that subscribes to the ideal that schools have a responsibility to inculcate basic cultural and political values and behaviors."

Inculcation may be employed effectively and appropriately to develop habits of hygiene and deportment and to shape character (instilling virtues of honesty, kindness, and so forth). In a free society, however, inculcation cannot be the single method of teaching about values or anything else. Rather, as students mature, they should have more and more exposure to education in critical thinking about issues, which allows rational justification of core civic values. Sydney Hook, an eminent philosopher committed to educating students about core civic values in our American heritage, says: "A free society not only permits but encourages questioning, commensurate with the intellectual powers of students, as integral to learning" (1984, p. 22). By contrast, a closed or totalitarian society "never permits a critical study of its first principles and the alternatives to them."

An extreme alternative to indoctrination, unlike Sydney Hook's position, is represented by relativists who propose development of certain rational procedures in the analysis of civic values as their primary or even exclusive educational goal. Their concern for teaching particular values seems limited

to building support for rationality and diversity. Teaching techniques involve case studies or simulations about complex issues. Students are challenged to decide how to minimize costs and maximize benefits as they appraise options in terms of their values. An assumption of this position is that basic values, in which choices are grounded, may vary considerably from student to student and from one situation to another in the deliberations of a particular student. Teachers are expected to guide students in their use of rational processes needed to analyze and clarify value judgments, but they are not supposed to prescribe values or choices made in terms of them. Furthermore, extreme open-mindedness and tolerance of diverse viewpoints should prevail in the classroom. In this position, there are "right" procedures in thinking about values, but no "right" answers. Leming's view of research (1985) on values clarification--a relativistic and process oriented position--reveals mixed findings and confusion about the instructional power of this approach. On balance, it seems to be a rather weak means to significant gains in students' comprehension of civic values or capabilities in using cognitive strategies and skills. This position on values education is not practiced widely in American elementary and secondary schools.

In contrast to extreme positions on values education, many educators propose a middle way, which involves commitment to core civic values and critical thinking in the use of these standards to judge options and make choices about public issues and policies. This position recognizes that teachers in schools cannot evade responsibility for imparting and reinforcing core civic values of the society that sponsors them. Schools are major agencies in the socialization of youngsters--the process of inducting each generation into the roles and institutions of an orderly society--which necessarily involves direct and emphatic instruction on traditions, standards, and ideals that define a civilization. However, a fundamental ideal of the American heritage is freedom to think, inquire, and communicate ideas--even if the ideas are unusual or unpopular or critical of prevailing practices and beliefs. The Constitution guarantees civil liberties of individuals and minority groups against the tyranny of ruling elites and the tyranny of majority rule.

Proponents of this middle-way position want students to learn about inherent paradoxes of a free society--the inevitable tensions between socialization and social criticism, authority and liberty, majority rule and minority rights--which generate perennial public issues (Butts, 1980). A fundamental objective is teaching students to avoid polar extremes in a paradox while seeking the balance between values in conflict. For example, students should be challenged to appraise complex issues in American history that have involved tensions between the core values of majority rule and minority rights. Classic analyses and decisions about these issues and values, found in landmark cases of the Supreme Court, should be staples of the curriculum.

Balanced education about values and issues in American schools has been threatened periodically by "curriculum evangelists" who want to promote their doctrines among captive audiences of students. Textbooks are prime targets of these dogmatists who want to purge the curriculum of "immoral" or "false"

or "unpatriotic" content. From the 1960s to the 1980s teachers have been under heavy pressures from one-sided advocates of various left-wing and right-wing causes or ideologies. Butts (1980) and Janowitz (1983) urge educators in the social studies to resist pressures from extremists to use the schools to promote their causes; educators should, instead, maintain high standards of scholarship and fairness in teaching about civic values and other facets of the curriculum.

Scholarly literature on the teaching of civic values includes research findings and propositions about practices that are compatible with the views of R. Freeman Butts, Morris Janowitz, and Sydney Hook on the necessity of rejecting the positions of extremists (dogmatists and relativists) in teaching about civic values. These ideas are summarized below.

1. Direct instruction can be used to develop knowledge of civic values and skills in literal comprehension and interpretation of them. It can also contribute to acquisition of specific skills in critical thinking about civic values in relationship to public issues or problems (NCSS Task Force, 1984). Direct methods include didactic teaching about exemplars of good citizenship in episodes from history and current events, authoritative reinforcement of classroom behavior that exemplifies core civic values, expository lessons on the meaning of civic values, and teacher-guided analysis of values in case studies of public issues and decisions.

2. Indirect teaching contributes to development of certain civic values and cognitive capabilities. Indirect methods pertain to the context of teaching and learning about values--the classroom climate, interactions of teacher and students in discussions of public issues and decisions, and opportunities to explore various positions through independent study. There is a positive relationship between investigation of public issues in open and supportive classroom environments and development of democratic values and strategies in critical thinking. If students feel free to examine and express ideas about public issues, they are more likely to support civic values and learn cognitive strategies necessary to effective citizenship in a free society (Leming, 1985; Johnson & Johnson, 1979).

3. Direct and indirect methods of teaching can be used in combination to address distinct and complementary objectives, such as building students' knowledge about civic values of a free society, strategies and skills in applying civic values to critical thinking about public issues and decisions, and support for civic values (NCSS Task Force, 1983).

4. Core civic values of a free society can be taught most effectively in connection with knowledge and critical thinking processes anchored in academic disciplines of history and the social sciences; these connections are likely to contribute significantly to students' comprehension of core values and their ability to apply them to analyses and appraisals of ideas (NCSS Task Force, 1983; Boyer, 1983).

Summary

Educational reform in elementary and secondary schools has been a hot topic during the 1980s. Major newspapers, magazines, and television networks have highlighted reports and debates about teaching and learning of basic subjects, including history and the social sciences; these subjects comprise the social studies curriculum in schools. Public concern and criticism has stimulated educators in the social studies to reappraise theories and practices in curriculum development and pedagogy. There has been lively discourse about knowledge, cognitive skills, and values that all students might be expected to learn through education in the social studies. Three major topics in this debate are (a) core content, (b) critical thinking, and (c) civic values.

Core Content

Leaders of the educational reform movement recommend required core content anchored in the disciplines of American history, history of western and nonwestern civilizations, government or political science, geography, and economics. They assume that all secondary school students have need for and ability to learn conceptual frameworks of academic subjects. Proponents of an extensive core content requirement in the social studies contend that it would provide students of all social classes with equal access to knowledge needed for competent participation in contemporary American society, bring coherence and integrity to the curriculum, and enhance national unity and cohesion in a pluralistic society.

Opponents of the core content position argue it would not meet needs of students with little interest in or aptitude for academic work or preparation for college. Furthermore, it would violate longstanding commitments to address individual differences through many options in the curriculum. Finally, it would confine perspectives of students to the boundaries of academic disciplines and thereby limit insights, creativity, and knowledge of reality. Selection and organization of content around public issues, social problems, and timely topics are favored by many opponents of the academic subjects position. An assumption of this interdisciplinary approach is that strategies and skills in thinking about issues or problems are much more significant educationally than content.

Critical Thinking

Educators with differing views about core content have, in general, endorsed critical thinking, and they tend to agree that it is not treated extensively or satisfactorily in most social studies classrooms. However, there is disagreement about the meaning, purposes, and practices of critical thinking.

Construed broadly, critical thinking in the social studies is equated with problem-solving or inquiry. Narrow definitions specify evaluation as the core of critical thinking. Conceived broadly or narrowly, critical thinking implies skepticism and rationality in appraisal of claims about knowledge and ideals. Critical thinking is not synonymous with negativism or iconoclasm. It is compatible with the highest ideals of scholarship and citizenship in a free society.

One position on critical thinking in the social studies advocates the primacy of cognitive skills, which should be the constant and essential elements of a curriculum. In this position, there is no essential knowledge; rather, subject matter to which critical thinking skills are applied might vary with interests of students in timely topics, problems, or issues. This position is supposed to develop generalizable skills that might be transferred pervasively to subjects within and outside of school.

An opposing position holds that cognitive processes and core content are equally important and should be treated in concert. In this position, development of cognitive processes is assumed to be dependent upon particular structures of knowledge. Thus, critical thinking about issues or problems should be taught within separate academic disciplines to yield desirable outcomes, such as enduring ability to apply cognitive processes and particular knowledge to issues and problems in new settings.

Civic Values

Critical thinking involves values, the criteria by which thinkers judge alternatives and make choices. Civic values are standards or criteria used by citizens to make judgments about public issues or policies of government officials. An overwhelming majority of Americans affirm, in the abstract, civic values in the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Gettysburg Address. These core civic values are stressed in curriculum guides and teaching materials, and most Americans expect them to be taught in schools, especially through subjects in the social studies. However, research indicates that many adolescents and adults have superficial or incoherent ideas about core values such as freedom, equality, justice, authority, responsibility, majority rule, and minority rights. How should these civic values be taught in social studies classrooms?

One position calls for unquestioned transmission of civic values. Teachers should impose "correct" answers clearly and absolutely, even to complex, perennial issues.

A second position proposes extreme relativism, a primary or exclusive concern with rational procedures in analyzing or clarifying values. Teachers are guides to "right" procedures in thinking about values, but they are not supposed to prescribe values other than commitment to diversity, open-mindedness, and rationality.

A third position represents a middle way between excessive inculcation and extreme relativism. This position recognizes that educators should develop commitment to core civic values of a free society, which include freedom to inquire, criticize, and communicate ideas. Proponents of this position want students to reflect upon complex, perennial issues associated with paradoxes of a free society, such as majority rule with minority rights or liberty with authority. A fundamental objective is teaching students to avoid polar extremes in a paradox while seeking the delicate balance between values in conflict.

Propositions on Core Content, Critical Thinking, Civic Values

The following propositions are responses to current issues in social studies education on core content, critical thinking, and civic values. There is substantial, but not conclusive, support for these statements in the literature on curriculum development and teaching in the social studies. Therefore, the propositions are offered primarily as stimulators of discourse and inquiry and as tentative guides to educational practice.

1. Strong and extensive emphasis on core content, based on conceptual frameworks of academic disciplines in history and social sciences, is likely to lead to significant increases in knowledge among large numbers of secondary school students.

2. Effective teaching and learning of critical thinking involves practice of skills in terms of a cognitive strategy and in concert with core content of specific academic disciplines.

3. Core civic values of a free society can be taught most effectively in connection with knowledge and critical thinking processes anchored in conceptual frameworks in history and the social sciences; these connections are likely to contribute significantly to students' comprehension of core civic values, to their ability to use them to analyze and appraise ideas, and to their support for them.

4. Students' acquisition, retention, and effective use of core content, cognitive processes (critical thinking), and civic values are likely to be facilitated greatly if these essential elements of the curriculum are structured logically and interrelatedly within and between subjects and from one one level to the next, with gradual increases in complexity and standards of achievement that fit the cognitive development and prior learning experiences of students.

5. Direct instruction can be used to develop students' knowledge of civic values and skills in thinking critically about them. Direct methods include didactic teaching and modeling and reinforcement of desired behavior.

6. Indirect teaching procedures, such as discussion of issues in an open and supportive classroom environment, are related to students' development of critical thinking strategies and core civic values of a free society.

7. Direct and indirect methods of teaching can be combined and used effectively to build students' knowledge of core civic values of a free society, strategies and skills in applying them to critical thinking about public issues and policies, and commitment to them.

8. All students, regardless of social class or presumed limitations in ambition or ability, have some capacity to learn core content, critical thinking, and civic values. This potential can be developed more extensively than in the past through core curriculum requirements. If so, opportunities for academic achievement, socioeconomic advancement, and effective citizenship will be spread more widely and equitably in our society.

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